



# Accounting for the Missing

Story by Steve Harding

The Army and DOD join forces to locate and identify missing service members.



**T**HIS month marks a watershed in the continuing effort to locate, recover and identify those still missing from America's past conflicts.

If all goes according to plan, on Oct. 1 the two organizations that have long spearheaded the search for the nation's unaccounted-for service members — the U.S. Army Central Identification Laboratory, Hawaii, and Joint Task Force-Full Accounting — will join forces to become the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command.

The new organization will blend

CILHI's 247 service members and Department of the Army civilians with JTF-FA's 161 service members and Navy Department civilians, with command vested in an Army brigadier general, said CILHI's last Army commander, COL Paul A. Bethke.

Headquartered at Hickam Air Force Base in Honolulu, CILHI was part of the U.S. Total Army Personnel Command in Alexandria, Va. JTF-FA was also based in Honolulu, at the Marine Corps' Camp H.M. Smith, and reported to U.S. Pacific Command. The new organization will also report to PACOM and will remain in Hawaii, Bethke said.

The commander of the new organization is BG W. Montague Winfield, formerly the assistant division commander for support in the Hawaii-based 25th Infantry Division.

◀ The consolidation of CILHI and JTF-FA means the end of the former as an Army agency, though probably not a move from its longtime home — Hickham AFB.



Cpl. Ricardo Morales, USMC







While CILHI had a well-earned reputation for sending recovery teams wherever the mission required, few operations were as challenging as the September 2002 excavation of a World War II crash site more than 15,000 feet up in the Himalaya Mountains of southeastern Tibet.



## Experience and Accomplishment

Each agency brings a wealth of experience and history of accomplishment to the new Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command, officials said.

JTF-FA, for its part, was established in January 1992 and grew out of the Joint Casualty Resolution Center that since 1973 had led the U.S. government's efforts to account for service members and certain American civilians missing as a result of the war in Southeast Asia. Comprised of investigators, analysts, linguists and other specialists representing all four military services and Navy civilian employees, JTF-FA maintained detachments in Bangkok, Thailand; Hanoi, Vietnam; and Vientiane, Laos.

As the lead agency for Vietnam-era searches and recoveries, JTF-FA did the research and investigative groundwork for recovery efforts in Southeast Asia. However, since the organization had no recovery teams of its own, recovery operations were always conducted by CILHI personnel, with the two agencies working together in the field.

CILHI also traced its roots to the conflict in Southeast Asia, having

evolved from the U.S. military mortuaries that operated in Ton Son Nhut and Danang, South Vietnam, during that conflict. In 1973 those facilities were closed and their operations moved to Thailand. The move to Hawaii and the resulting creation of CILHI occurred in 1976. Though it was an Army organization, since October 2001 CILHI's military personnel had been drawn from each of the services.

While JTF-FA dealt exclusively with Vietnam-era cases, CILHI's worldwide mission encompassed those unaccounted for from World War II, Korea and the Cold War, as well as Southeast Asia. In addition to its search-and-recovery operations and casualty-data analysis functions, CILHI had a staff of some 30 anthropologists and four odontologists — forensic dentists — who undertook the identification of the remains recovered during both CILHI and joint CILHI-JTF-FA missions [*see accompanying story*].

In addition to its primary recovery and identification task, CILHI also participated in humanitarian missions — such as assisting in the recovery

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and identification of remains following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., and aiding federal and local law-enforcement agencies.

## A Continuing Need

While the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command's mission incorporates CILHI's humanitarian-assistance activities, the new agency's primary focus will continue to be on recovering and identifying personnel unaccounted for during the period from World War II to Vietnam. It is a

▲ Local assistance has always been a key part of CILHI and JTF-FA operations. Here, CILHI's CPT Octave MacDonald speaks with local workers before a February 2003 excavation on a site in Vietnam's Kien Giang province.





daunting task, Bethke said, for there are more than 78,000 still missing from WWII, about 8,100 from the Korean War, 1,900 from the Vietnam War and about 120 from the Cold War.

Of those missing from WWII, officials estimate that only some 35,000 can be recovered — the others were either buried at sea or are entombed within sunken vessels. While CILHI made WWII-era recoveries in such areas as Europe, Turkey, Burma and Tibet, the majority of operations were — and will probably continue to be — in Papua New Guinea and the small island

chains scattered across the South Pacific [*for a close-up look at one of those WWII operations, see “A Search for the Missing” in the August 2002 issue*].

In terms of Korean War recoveries, officials estimate that some 5,500 of the Americans still unaccounted for were last seen in North Korea. It wasn't until 1996 that American search-and-recovery teams were allowed into that communist nation, and operations there must still be negotiated on a year-to-year basis.

Though the numbers of American personnel missing from the Cold War



Careful measurement, marking and excavation are vital in every search-and-recovery mission — such as this January 2002 CILHI effort on Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands.

are relatively small, their recovery is no less important, Bethke said. CILHI teams carried out search-and-recovery operations in Armenia, Russia, China and Nicaragua, leading to the recovery and eventual identification of some 15 American service members.

While each recovery is important, those from the war in Southeast Asia have most often been the focus of

public attention. And it is also the area of the former JTF-FA's expertise, Bethke said. The 10 CILHI teams that were traditionally allocated to operations in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos were under JTF-FA's operational control, and operations in Southeast Asia will undoubtedly be a major part of the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command's mission.

## Best of Both Worlds

Combining the data archives and historical-research and information-analysis operations of both CILHI and JTF-FA will have a range of benefits, Bethke said. Most importantly, it means the new agency's team of casualty-data analysts will have direct access to the personnel, medical and dental records of most of the nation's unaccounted-for service members.

And for the anthropologists who actually undertake the identification of recovered remains, one of the most important benefits of the consolidation of CILHI and JTF-FA is that the latter agency's life-support analysts will become part of the laboratory. Primarily drawn from the Navy and Air Force, these personnel are

▶ Sifting every pail of dirt recovered from the excavated site ensures that no remains, no matter how small, are overlooked. Later, forensic anthropologists will use a range of techniques to attempt to identify the remains.

specialists in the various types of equipment worn by flight crews.

"When we're in the field, the anthropologists almost always work most closely with the life-support analysts," said Dr. Helen M. Wols, a CILHI forensic anthropologist and lab manager. "We're always going to our LSAs to have them determine if an item or fragment we've found is part of something worn or used by American aircrews. If they determine that it is, we expand the area in which we're digging. So to have them here is going to be extremely helpful, because we can get immediate feedback."

## A Well-planned Operation

The merger of CILHI and JTF-FA is an event that was well thought out and logically planned, Bethke said.

"This consolidation process has been evaluated and approved at many levels, and the determination has been made that this is the best way to ensure

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A CIL forensic anthropologist takes measurements from a laboratory test specimen, exactly as is done during the examination of actual remains.

# Identifyin

Story and Photo by Steve Harding

WHILE their workplace is now officially known as the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command's Central Identification Laboratory, the mission of the anthropologists and forensic odontologists of the former CILHI hasn't changed. Simply put, it's their job to identify the recovered remains of American service members.

The first step in that process is the





# g the Recovered

analysis of the skeletal remains, which is always undertaken by an anthropologist who did not take part in the actual recovery of the remains.

“That’s done so that when the anthropologists begin their analyses they don’t have any preconceived notions of what they’re going to find,” said Dr. Helen M. Wols, a CIL forensic anthropologist and lab manager.

The nature and location of the

service member’s death can greatly influence how much materiel the anthropologists have to work with, Wols said. For example, the skeletal remains of soldiers killed in ground combat tend to be more complete and better preserved than those of pilots whose aircraft crashed into the ground at high speeds.

The anthropologist first lays out the remains in anatomical order and

removes any debris or commingled remains. By examining the size, density and other characteristics of the remains, the anthropologist can often glean such information as the age, sex, race and stature of the deceased, and can often detect the signs of medical disorders from which the person might have suffered, Wols said.

Because teeth are very durable and the dental work a person undergoes ➤



that we have the most effective organization to continue the search for those missing from all our nation's wars," he said.

## Positive, But Bittersweet

While the CILHI-JTF-FA merger is a positive and logical step that will produce a more efficient and more

capable organization, Bethke said being the last Army commander of an Army-owned CILHI is bittersweet.

"I first served at CILHI as a team leader and executive officer from 1985 to 1989," he said. "And being the last commander is rather emotional. Having been here when the staff was just 17 people, and then serving here when the number is 247, has been a

can be very individualistic, odontology can also provide key information. The lab's odontologists work independently, and can refer to a computer database that includes most of the dental information for personnel missing from the Vietnam and Korean wars. The computer will generate a list of possible matches for the teeth.

"The forensic odontologists compare the dental remains that we recover with the ante-mortem dental records in order to make a positive dental identification," Wols said. "And that's the type of identification we really want, that's the standard."

If a dental ID is not possible, the lab can turn to mitochondrial DNA, or mtDNA, analysis, Wols said.

"Mitochondrial DNA is very hardy, and there are thousands of copies of it per cell, so it's easier to get from a bone or a tooth than nuclear DNA," she said. "But if the bone has been burned or the fragment is very small,

we can't get it. Currently, about 50 percent of our cases go to mtDNA."

The mtDNA can be drawn from teeth or bones, but if drawn from the latter the process is destructive because the sample must be cut from the bone, Wols said. Once obtained, samples are sent to the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory in Rockville, Md. If AFDIL is able to "sequence" the mtDNA in the sample, the CIL staff asks the branch to which the service member belonged to contact the person's family to ask for a family reference sample.

While an mtDNA match between a family member and the deceased service member is strong evidence for a positive identification, Wols said, it is not conclusive because people who are only distantly related may share similar sequences. Instead, the mtDNA match is considered one more piece in the identification "puzzle" — the goal is to make the identification



The mission of the Joint POW/MIA Command is the same as those of the agencies from which it was formed: to locate, recover and return the remains of missing service members.

fascinating and emotional experience.

"I knew when I came back as commander that the consolidation was a possibility and that CILHI's time as an Army unit would end," Bethke said. "But I also knew that the mission would continue, that the service we provide to the families of the missing would get better, and in that sense I don't feel at all bad about the merger.

"The important thing for all of us to remember — everyone who wears our nation's uniform, and our family members — is that all of us in this new organization remain firmly committed to the fullest possible accounting of our missing," he said. "This consolidation is a recommitment to that mission, and it will allow us to be even more effective in locating, recovering and identifying the remains of our missing." 📧

by combining the mtDNA results with the other analyses.

Once the anthropologists and odontologists complete their analyses, other members of the lab's scientific staff review each case. The case is then forwarded to the agency's scientific director, who acts as a medical examiner to establish the identification. Once that identification is made, the case is forwarded to the appropriate service casualty office, which contacts the family.

By the time of its consolidation with JTF-FA, CILHI had been able to identify more than 1,100 sets of remains. And each identification has been important to the lab staffers, Wols said.

"The families of unaccounted-for service members have waited years for answers, and to be able to play some role, even if it's small, in them getting those answers is just so incredibly rewarding," she said. 📧